

Treasure from Ancient Oceans



1: Bassen established the East African Whale Shark Trust with his wife in 2005.



2: Bassen works with quarry workers to carefully excavate the fossilised clam shells.

From diving with whale sharks and creating worthy charities to discovering exceptional fossilised clamshells, Volker Bassen is a man of many talents. Here, *Gems&Jewellery* interviews the anthropologist, conservationist and entrepreneur to find out more about his global adventures.

What is your background and when did you first become fascinated with giant clamshells?

I moved to Kenya in 1990 at the age of 23, having studied engineering in Sweden. I first went to France to attend the PADI European College where I studied recreational scuba diving, dive management and operation. Scuba diving has always been my passion and I have since set up 23 scuba diving schools in Kenya. My favourite animal is the whale shark — the world's biggest fish. It is a gentle giant that can grow as large as six elephants! In 2005, my wife and I set up the East African Whale Shark Trust, in an effort to protect and conserve the whale shark (1).

I will never forget the first time I saw a giant fossilised *Tridacna Gigantea* clamshell. It was deeply embedded in an ancient coral reef limestone bank, about two kilometres from the sea! I met some local quarry workers nearby who were busy making so-called 'coral blocks', which are used for the building industry along the coast, and they showed me a specimen they had recently excavated. I was blown away as it was so massive — well over 100 kilograms.

This particular clamshell was severely broken and I asked them if it would be possible to excavate them without breaking them. They said it would be possible, but they didn't care if they broke as they were sold to a cement



3: Clamshells are often found metres below the ground, requiring delicate excavation work by local quarrymen.



4: Bassen pictured with an almost completely excavated fossilised clamshell.



5: While digging a well, the largest ever *T. Gigantea* pearl was found. It turned out to be in pristine condition underneath the 250,000 year-old limestone.

factory. I went to the cement factory in Mombasa and found a person who could answer my question: what do you use these broken clamshells for? I was told they are crushed into aragonite powder, which is then used in the production of white cement. I thought this was sacrilege and started buying clamshells from the local quarry workers whenever they would find one (2 & 3).

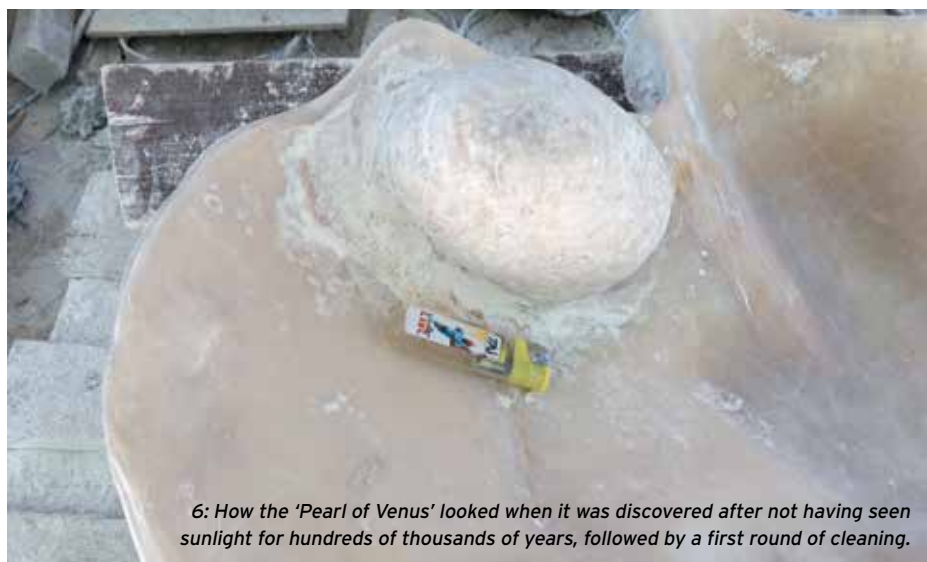
When did you start collecting the fossilised clamshells of the now extinct *Tridacna Gigantea*?

I started collecting *Tridacna Gigantea* 20 years ago (4). I rarely sell any, and in many cases give them away as gifts such as simple jewellery we make out of the so-called 'heart' of the clamshell, where the [living] clam would have started growing. I remember the first clamshell I bought and cleaned up found a home in my living room and I still have it. On the day my son Samuel was born I received one of my biggest clamshells from a chieftain of the Digo tribe. After cleaning away all the ancient limestone, two fossilised blister pearls (later certified by GIA) were found inside. The clamshell, which weighed 297 kilograms, was found 4.3 metres below the ground and took a month to excavate.

When asked how much the clamshells were to purchase, I stumbled... how much does one ask for when every piece is unique?

What can you tell us about the *Tridacna Gigantea* blister pearl you found that is believed to be the largest of its kind?

In 2014, while digging a water well for an orphanage, my workers found a 355 kilogram clamshell with a huge boulder the size of a mango sticking out of it (5). This turned out to be the largest *Tridacna Gigantea* baroque blister pearl found to date, in pristine condition (6). We nicknamed it the 'Pearl of Venus'



6: How the 'Pearl of Venus' looked when it was discovered after not having seen sunlight for hundreds of thousands of years, followed by a first round of cleaning.

7: The 'Pearl of Venus' – dubbed the 'rarest pearl on earth' – cleaned and polished.



and estimated its date at around 240-250,000 years old (7). *Tridacna Gigantea* went extinct around 180,000 years ago.

My wife encouraged me to exhibit my finds and I ended-up at the 2016 Hong Kong Gemstone, Mineral and Fossil Exhibition, where I managed to rent a booth at the last minute. Soon people were queuing to have their photo taken next to the world's biggest clamshell! When asked how much the clamshells were to purchase, I stumbled. I have never been in that situation before... how much does one ask for when every piece is unique? I shook on a price of roughly US\$100 per kilogram for two of the largest specimens and sold all of the spheres, balls and jewellery I also had on my stand within half a day.

Did this lead to more international recognition for giant fossilised clamshells? Where did you go next?

Following this I participated in several shows in Hong Kong, Tucson, Saint-Marie, Munich, Dubai, London and Paris (8). Everywhere I had the same success, people were in disbelief! I decided to focus on interior design shows instead of gemstone, mineral and fossil shows and it proved to be the perfect move. These clamshells make the most beautiful luxury washbasins in the world as every piece is unique (9). While attending the Maison&Objet Paris interior design show, legendary yacht interior designer Rémi Tessier walked to my booth, purchased three clamshells and ordered eight more for the *Eclipse* — a luxury motor yacht built Russian businessman Roman Abramovich.

How did you develop the connection with *Tridacna Gigantea*, the Roman goddess Venus and your charity WonderCup?

I saw the painting *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli, painted in 1485, and it suddenly dawned on me that Venus, the goddess of love and fertility, was born from a giant clamshell according to legend. As I sold more and more fossilised clamshells I used the proceeds to fund menstrual cups for adolescent girls at an orphanage, which I continue to support today. World Bank estimates that adolescent schoolgirls in developing nations lose 20% of their education because they can't afford sanitary items. This inspired me to create WonderCup, a brand, charity and educational service designed to help local girls. So far, we have donated



8: Bassen showcasing his finds at trade events across the world.



9: The clamshells continue to sell well as luxury washbasins for hotels and private customers.



10: The Venus Collection on display at The Hotel Show Dubai.

These clamshells make the most beautiful luxury washbasins in the world as every piece is unique.

10,000 WonderCups financed by the sale of clamshells and jewellery.

Today, our Venus Collection jewellery (venuscollection.co.uk) and *Tridacna* Collection jewellery (tridacna-collection.com) allows women to make a statement, while improving the lives of others and helping to end the stigma around menstruation that many continue to face (10 & 11).



11: Jewellery from the *Tridacna* Collection, handmade in Kenya and Germany, using fossilised giant clamshells. The sale of each piece benefits Bassen's charity, WonderCup.

You are an active philanthropist and conservationist at heart. What else are you involved in to protect some of the world's most endangered species?

I am an honorary member of the Hainan Sea Shell Conservation Group, which was set up to protect modern-day giant clamshells, *Tridacna Gigas*, from extinction (12). To just sit back and point fingers isn't going to work. You have to identify like-minded people and start sharing information and facts with them. Only from within can you provoke real change.



12: Bassen in his role as an honorary member of the Hainan Sea Shell Conservation Group.

Some *Tridacna* clam species are now protected under CITES appendix 1, the same as ivory. Needless to say I often get asked if the clamshells we offer are legal to export and import. The answer is yes, as they are extinct and don't fall under CITES categories (similar to ivory versus mammoth tusks). All our clamshells come with a certificate verifying they are from an extinct species for peace of mind.

Elsewhere, I offered fossilised *Tridacna Gigantea* specimens as a sustainable alternative to ivory carvers in 2012 (13). The results were magnificent. ■



13: An example of a beautiful clamshell carving as an alternative to ivory.



A giant fossilised *Tridacna Gigantea* clamshell is lifted by three Kenyan quarry workers.

All images courtesy of the author.